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As forecasters predicted the worst flooding in nearly 20 years, hundreds of volunteers turned out Monday to fill sandbags and deliver them by canoe and rowboat to already submerged homes along the Des Plaines River.

"I'm just here because I figured if I needed help, I'd want people to help me, and I think they would," said Gurnee resident Tom LeBaron, taking a break while filling bags in the Warren Township High School parking lot.

The Des Plaines River in Gurnee is expected to crest early Wednesday when it reaches 12 feet, 7 inches -nearly a foot higher than the 1986 flood that displaced more than 7,000 Lake and Cook county residents.

The flooding will continue Thursday in Des Plaines, when the river will likely reach a high point of 11 feet, 3 inches.

In both cases, water will be about 6 feet higher than flood level.

Still, state and local officials predict the damage won't be as great as it was in 1986, thanks to several flood-proofing projects like new reservoirs and levees and a better-prepared deployment of sandbags and sump pumps.

This time around, there also are fewer homes standing in the flood plain.

And while the 1986 flood came largely from one major downpour, this week's flooding was a work in progress spread out over several weeks of heavy rains. Already, the area has seen more than three times the roughly 3 inches of normal rainfall for May, said Bill Morris, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service.

Hardest hit so far has been Gurnee, where elementary schools and Warren Township High School campuses closed Monday because flood waters were surrounding several school and administration buildings.

A church just east of the Des Plaines River was using a canoe for a "water taxi" to cart volunteers across the several feet of water that filled its front lawn. And at least eight families were forced to leave their homes.

Authorities believe the flood, at a minimum, will affect a roughly 2 square mile area of Gurnee bounded by Route 21 on the west, Route 41 on the north, First Street on the east and Washington Street to the south.

That boundary, however, assumes no further rain either in Lake County or farther north near Kenosha, Wis., the river's source.

Both areas are expected to get more rain in coming days, so the affected area most likely will grow, Gurnee Fire Chief Fred Friedl said.

In Des Plaines, water has filled some streets, but the worst is yet to come.

Cook County dispatched two busloads of convicts from its work-release program to a Wheeling Township neighborhood to fill and stack thousands of sandbags.

Forest River residents joined the effort, which is expected to save the vast majority of houses in the subdivision despite predictions of the record-breaking river crest.

The city's department heads have met daily since Friday to plan for flooding problems. They also have been warning residents on city Web sites, cable access channels and automated telephone systems.

"It's nice to have it happen with this much advance notification," Des Plaines Police Chief James Prandini said. "We have time to prepare."

Village officials in other communities, including Lincolnshire and Libertyville, also were handing out sandbags Sunday and Monday.

Some other towns were more confident they would escape major problems.

"I think we're going to be in fairly good shape," Mount Prospect Village Manager Michael Janonis said. "We've got enough lead time to hold it down."

It's unclear if and when the area will be declared a federal disaster area, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said. That decision is left up to President Bush and probably wouldn't come until later this week.

In the meantime, most residents will have to wait and wonder about the river's looming wrath.

"There is really nothing else you can do," Wheeling Township resident Noreen McAndrews said as she watched workers fill sandbags in her neighborhood. "You can't prepare for something like this if it's really bad. You just can't do it."

- Daily Herald staff writers Bob Susnjara, Jim Fuller, Amy McLaughlin and Sara Faiwell contributed to this report.

Flood: More rain is expected